Intelligence is a force multiplier

by Olivia Swaak-Goldman*, Executive Director of the Wildlife Justice Commission

Transnational criminal networks are a major factor in illegal wildlife trade. The application of intelligence analysis and advanced investigative techniques, along with international collaboration and coordination, are crucial to effectively disrupt criminal networks to secure the protection of elephants and other wildlife in the long-term.

Intelligence analysis is an incredibly important force multiplier when resources are low and the problem is vast, as it allows for investigations to remain focussed on the greatest criminal threat. Therefore, intelligence must form part of any overarching strategy to tackle wildlife crime. The lack of both technical and human capacity is currently a major obstacle to the widespread use of intelligence analysis. Moreover, the wildlife crime global intelligence picture suffers from major gaps as a result of this lack of intelligence analysis. Tackling these lacunas is essential in ensuring the protection of Central African ecosystems. The Wildlife Justice Commission has vast experience in the use of intelligence and analysis to scale up its impact in this sector.

The Wildlife Justice Commission has made intelligence analysis key to its strategy and created the infrastructure to facilitate this. The Wildlife Justice Commission’s Intelligence Development Unit (IDU) is a fully functional team of criminal intelligence analysts with law enforcement backgrounds and is currently the largest team of analysts working on wildlife crime in any not-for-profit organisation. The IDU is internationally recognised for its high-quality data and analytical efforts. It intends to be a centre of excellence not only for intelligence analysis relating to wildlife crime, but also for upskilling external analysts and, through the outputs it produces, professionalising and promoting the use of intelligence and analysis to scale up its impact in this sector.

Over the last five years, the IDU has built up a wealth of information relevant to the current wildlife trafficking problem, which has a great value for both conservation and law enforcement circles. The Wildlife Justice Commission has invested in the acquisition and retention of such data in its comprehensive intelligence database. This database, along with its dedicated data analysts, means that the Wildlife Justice Commission is in a unique position to generate meaningful insights on a regular basis and is frequently relied upon for its expertise.

Furthermore, the way the Wildlife Justice Commission operates puts in a unique position to understand wildlife trafficking. It works in many countries that play an important role in the global trafficking of wildlife. The organisation currently has 24 active operations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, many of which are interconnected. The links between these operations could not have been discovered without the use of intelligence. While law enforcement agencies’ jurisdictions often stop at their country’s borders, crime does not. The IDU analyses crime on a transnational level to fill this intelligence gap, which is a necessary approach currently not undertaken by other relevant actors.

Through the Wildlife Justice Commission’s experience in supporting law enforcement

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WILDLIFE JUSTICE COMMISSION

The Wildlife Justice Commission was established in 2015 at the height of the African poaching crisis with the intention of holding criminals, if need be governments, accountable for killing and selling wildlife. In an environment where intelligence was lacking, corruption was rife and where governments failed to cooperate, the Wildlife Justice Commission tasked itself with collecting actionable evidence with the view of convicting high level traffickers. In the first five years of its existence, the Wildlife Justice Commission helped to get more than 124 perpetrators arrested and stopped an untold number of elephants, pangolins, rhinos, tigers, turtles and other endangered species from being killed, maimed and trafficked. These successes are results of the Wildlife Justice Commission’s approach. It conducts intelligence-led investigations based on law enforcement methodology. The Wildlife Justice Commission shares intelligence reports, presents compelling evidence, builds law enforcement capabilities, and encourages further action in order to have governments do what is necessary to stop these crimes. The Wildlife Justice Commission can assist governments and other organisations in educating intelligence officers in the field of illegal wildlife trade.

Wildlife Justice Commission’s headquarters are based in The Hague, The Netherlands www.wildlifejustice.org
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Wildlife Justice Commission

Our planet’s wildlife is being decimated. According to a 2019 IPBES report on threats to biodiversity, the planet is at risk of losing more than one million species in the coming decade. Wildlife trafficking plays a major role in this destruction, driving many species towards extinction, as well as threatening global security and public health. Estimated to be worth between USD 7-25 billion per year, it is a very lucrative form of crime. Wildlife trafficking also entails serious economic consequences. The World Bank estimates that the financial and economic consequences of transnational organised wildlife crime can amount to as much as USD 1-2 trillion per year. Current efforts are not adequate to slow this down.

Africa is a major hub for such trafficking and many African countries are losing their national heritage at an alarming rate. Many species are endangered due to deforestation, habitat loss and poaching, amongst others. This concerns iconic species such as the African elephant and great apes, as well as lesser-known species such as the pangolins and endemic birds. This is very much the reality of Central African ecosystems.

A series of legislative reforms are not the only measures China has taken. It is followed up and supported by effective, coordinated and intelligence-led law enforcement actions in China. In the first nine months of 2020, China prosecuted 15,544 people for wildlife-related crimes, up 66.2% from 2019, and of which 3,280 individuals were charged with illegal purchasing, selling, transporting, or smuggling endangered wild animals and the products made thereof. A profound legislative basis combined with effective law enforcement is assessed to have had an impact on the criminal dynamics of illegal ivory trade. Indications of this include direct references from wildlife traffickers and traders now reluctant to trade raw ivory, and who are consequently stockpiling ivory in key countries along the supply chain, causing a steep decline in its street value.

Equatorial Guinea

Taking a closer look at these law enforcement actions in China shows an interesting picture. Equatorial Guinea, one of the smallest nations in Africa, borders the Congo Basin region, especially Equatorial Guinea. Meanwhile, the central question is yet to be answered: how can China’s determination in fighting the illegal wildlife trade and the positive results garnered so far be translated into the preservation of the Central African forest and biodiversity?


The Intelligence Development Unit (IDU) of the Wildlife Justice Commission also upskills external analyists.